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ABSTRACT

Given the aging of the population, the need for an increased number of persons trained and educated in gerontology is evident. To date, gerontology curricula have been based upon institutional requirements and interests, such as the guidelines provided by the Foundations Project (1980). To expand these guidelines, the needs and interests of the directors of 60 agencies serving the elderly in Santa Clara County, California, were surveyed. The results indicated that few persons working in local programs have gerontology backgrounds, although directors realized the need for this education and would like persons educated in gerontology on their staffs. Knowledge in health and aging, psychology, ethnicity, and social work were needs stressed by respondents. Essential skills included resource awareness, planning, needs assessment, and evaluation. In comparing these findings with results of the Foundations Project, two of the three core requirements for gerontology education identified in the project (health and psychology) also were supported by the present survey. The third requirement, physiology of aging, was listed by a minority (48%) of the present respondents. In the area of specific skills, planning, counseling, and evaluation were essential to a majority of the present survey respondents, as compared to a minority in the Foundations Project. These findings suggest that gerontology programs should probe their own communities in the development of their academic curriculum. (BL)

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GERONTOLOGY EDUCATION:

THE NEEDS OF LOCAL AGENCIES

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ABSTRACT

Gerontology Education: The Needs of Local Agencies

The need for an increased number of persons trained and educated in gerontology has been alluded to many times. The aging of the population will necessitate persons skilled and knowledgeable about the needs of this group. To date, gerontology curriculum have been based upon institutional requirements and interests. The Foundations Project (1980) provided guidelines for requirements in these curricula. This present survey of the directors of 60 agencies serving the elderly in Santa Clara County, California, expands these guidelines by further specifying agency needs and interests. The results indicate that few persons working in local programs have gerontology backgrounds although directors recognize the need for this education. Knowledge in health and aging, psychology, ethnicity and social work are needs stressed by respondents. Essential skills include resource awareness, planning, needs assessment and evaluation. These findings are compared and contrasted with those of the Foundations Project. The implications of the results in regards to the development of individual gerontology curriculum are discussed.

GERONTOLOGY EDUCATION: The Needs of Local Agencies

The need for an increased number of persons trained and educated in gerontology has been alluded to many times. The aging of the population will necessitate persons skilled and knowledgeable about the needs of this group; it is expected that this need will maintain itself into the next century. In order to meet this demand gerontology programs and departments have proliferated across the country since the 1970's.

The curricula of these programs differ widely based upon individual institutional needs and requirements. The Gerontology Program at San Jose State University, begun in 1977, established around its own institutional demands offers a Minor and a Certificate in Gerontology. The Program is interdisciplinary with courses being offered through several departments. The Program is expected to be changed into a Department in 1985. As part of the justification for this change the present survey of the educational needs and interests of local programs serving older persons was undertaken. The survey attempted to explore and hopefully justify the need for graduates trained and educated in a gerontology curriculum. Moreover, the survey of the needs and interests of agency directors and practitioners could assist in the development and upgrading of the present curricula making it more relevant to community needs.

Most students completing the 24 unit Gerontology Certificate at San Jose State are prepared to work in entry level positions in agencies. The results of the survey would help to assure that the education of these students was appropriate to the demands of these agencies.

The survey also intended to expand upon the findings of the Foundation Project (1980) which helped to identify a core curriculum in gerontology. By including in the present study only directors and administrators of community programs, the findings could be used to further specify topics and skills to be included in this curriculum.

Methods

Data were collected through the use of a telephone interview of the directors of 60 randomly selected agencies in the Santa Clara Valley. These Programs were selected through the directory of the United Way, the local Area Agency on Aging, and the Social Services Department. All of the agencies claimed to have older persons as a part of their clientele with some, such as the Senior Center, serving only this older sector of the population. Others, as in the case of the health care facilities and community programs such as the Heart Association and Cancer Society were not primarily for seniors. The programs participating in the survey included the following:

Senior Centers (12)
Transportation Programs (3)
Health Agencies (13)
Planning and Coordinating (4)
Housing (4)
Employment and Volunteer Agencies (6)
Community Service programs (7)
Counseling (8)
Legal Services (1)
Nutrition (1)
Education (1)

Directors of all agencies contacted agreed to participate in the study. Most of the directors were familiar with the Gerontology Program at San Jose

State and were interested in providing information that could assist in its growth. Many, 25%, had had field work students in gerontology placed in their agencies.

Results

The program ranged in size from a paid staff of 2 to 200 at one of the nursing homes. Of the total number of programs involved in the survey, only a minority, 35%, had any staff that had a gerontology education and in most cases this was limited to 1 or 2 people. The programs having the largest overall proportion, with 75% of the staff having this education, were the planning agencies. On the other hand, only 12% of the employees of the health programs and 40% of the staff of senior centers had been educated in gerontology.

Respondents were also asked whether or not they felt such an education would be helpful to the program. The response was almost unanimously positive. Ninety-four percent felt that this background would be an asset. The primary reasons given for its importance were an increased understanding of older persons, a sensitivity to their needs and problems, an understanding of their limitations and strengths, and a better ability on the part of the staff to assess individual situations.

Respondents also listed the skills and subject matter in which they felt staff should be knowledgeable. Of importance to almost all programs, 80%, was having staff who were knowledgeable about community resources. Second in overall importance, mentioned by 72% of the directors, was having staff

skilled in program planning. Counseling, evaluation, and needs assessment skills were listed as essential by 70%, 68% and 67% respectively. On the other hand, research, a topic stressed in much of the academic curriculum was mentioned as important by only 33% of the respondents.

In considering the interest of specific types of programs 100% of both the planning agencies (4) and the counseling programs (8) listed resource awareness. Needs assessments were listed by all community services (7), and all volunteer-employment programs (6). Planning skills were essential to all planning agencies, community services, and volunteer programs.

With regard to the subjects staff and students should be educated in, health care was rated as important by 75% of the respondents, psychology by 67%, social work by 62%, and nutrition by 60%. It is also interesting to note that ethnic and minority concerns were considered essential by 68% of the group. This interest reflects the heterogeneity of the population of the Santa Clara Valley which is composed of many ethnic and minority groups. Ethnicity is a key variable in service delivery and planning although its importance is just beginning to be recognized in the gerontology programs. The results of this survey have underscored this importance.

The majority of agency directors, 70%, stated that in hiring they would give preference to a person with a gerontology background. Those programs most uncertain about hiring this type of person were the community service programs such as the Cancer Society and Heart Association which deal with problems afflicting the community at large. Directors of these agencies felt

that with their limited staff they required persons who were generalists rather than gerontologists although a knowledge of aging issues would be an advantage.

The survey also inquired into starting salaries for potential gerontology graduates. As might be expected of human service agencies, these salaries were low. The median salary was $13,300 per year within a range of $10,000 to $23,000. Moreover, at the time of the survey, there were very few vacancies. Cutbacks in funding have made expansion very difficult although the need for more staff does exist.

Discussion

This survey studied the needs and interests of local agencies in the Santa Clara Valley in relation to the gerontological education of staff and students. The results indicate that there are few persons with this education in community programs. However, individual directors are aware of the need for this background and almost unanimously would like persons educated in gerontology on their staff. Health care, psychology, ethnicity, and social work were listed as subjects in which these persons should be educated. These persons should also be capable of locating local resources and skilled in doing needs assessments, planning, and counseling.

These findings have been compared with those of the original Foundations Project (1980--Table 1). The 3 core requirements for gerontology education identified in that Project by at least 90% of the respondents were psychology, health, and biology. Two of these subjects, health and psychology, were also mentioned by a majority in the present survey (67% and 75% respectively) al-

though the proportions were not as high as the 90% in the Foundation Project. On the other hand, physiology of aging was listed by a minority (48%) of the present respondents. Moreover, ethnicity listed as important by 68% of the agency directors was rated as important by only 45% of the respondents in the Foundations Project.

In the area of specific skills the two surveys also contrast sharply. Planning was essential to 72% in the present survey as compared to 27% in the Foundations Project, counseling was important to 70% and 17% respectively and evaluation to 68% verses 24%. The two surveys both ranked research as low priority, 33% in the present study and 28% in the Foundations Project.

These findings indicate that gerontology programs and departments should probe their own communities in the development of their academic curriculum. This may be particularly important for baccalaureate programs which are primarily educating gerontology students for entry level positions. According to the findings of this survey, included in this education should be practical skills such as resource awareness, needs assessments, and planning as these are relevant to the needs of the local programs serving the elderly. In order for gerontological education to be most valuable and applicable it must recognize and incorporate the needs and interests of the population it intends to serve.

Table I

Comparison of Importance of Subjects and Skills in Gerontology Education

	Agency Survey N=60 Percent	Foundation Report N=87 Percent
Subjects		
Health of aging	75	97
Psychology of aging	67	98
Physiology (biology)	48	91
Ethnicity	68	45
Sociology	50	86
Nutrition	60	62
Social Work	62	--
Skills		
Understanding of aging	96	97
Resource awareness	80	46
Planning	72	27
Counseling	70	17
Evaluation	68	24
Needs Assessments	67	38
Interviewing	62	78
Research	33	28